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Firefighters View the Latest Tool in Technology

By LOUISE KEOGH

The most advanced tool in modern firefighting was exhibited recently for members of the Duxbury Fire Department and their South Shore colleagues. Without exception these professional firefighters came away convinced that Thermal Imaging could make their jobs safer and, perhaps more importantly, save lives.

More than 25 firefighters from Duxbury and surrounding communities observed as CairnsIris demonstrated the infrared imaging fire helmet. The state-of-the-art equipment allows firefighters to "see" images through previously-impenetrable barriers, such as heavy smoke. As explained during the recent demonstration, this device could also be used by police and the harbormaster in the search and rescue of missing people.

I attended the demonstration to get a closer look at this lifesaving technology. My interest in this subject matter is personal; my father was a firefighter in Scituate. I remember with great clarity the number of times I feared he would not return home after a night of waging war against an unpredictable and deadly opponent called fire.

I remember one night in particular. Three hundred firefighters from throughout the South Shore, including Duxbury, converged along Scituate's seaside on May 23, 1974 to battle the Cliff Hotel fire. It took just a few hours for this 12-alarm fire to destroy 75 years of history contained in the 125-room oceanfront mansion. The

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A Pembroke firefighter at the recent demonstration of the thermal imaging firefighting technology at the Duxbury Fire Station.

place once called home by the late Boston Mayor James Michael Curley, as well as scores of celebrities, was reduced to smoldering timber and ashes.

We lived more than 12 miles away, yet the fire lit up the night as if it were the Fourth of July. I couldn't imagine how ferocious this fire was, how dangerous it was being a firefighter that night and so many nights before and after. I wanted that fire to be over. Yet I kept thinking of how proud I was of my dad and how all firefighters put their lives on the line every day. That night I realized that firefighting is indeed a calling, not simply a job and a paycheck. There must be easier ways to earn a living. That night we were blessed as my father returned home without injury.

For others, it is far different. It was early on Christmas Day, 1995 when John Steiner was awakened by a fire alarm in the Allston firehouse. Unknown at the time, he was on his way to a fire which would cause him serious injury and ultimately end his career.

When he arrived at the fire, later determined to be arson, he recalled that the smoke was so thick that he could barely see the building.

Inside he found a wall and slowly made his way up the stairs. He could hear firefighters working nearby, however, he could not even see his own hands in front of his face. As he literally felt his way down the hallway, he found a window and moved on, relying on his sense of touch as he groped along. He put on a light attached to his gear, but the light dissolved in the smoke.

Steiner took 1 step and then found himself falling. The opening he had found was, in fact, a window. Completely unaware, he had stepped outside the building and fell from the 2nd story. The injuries from which he would eventually recover forced him to take an early

retirement from the job he had loved.

Throughout the country there are millions of firefighters, like my dad and John Steiner, who put their lives on the line every day. Yet with the advancement of firefighting technology, these men and women are now better prepared to face the uncertain science of battling fires.

The latest advancement in vision technology was developed and used by the United States Air Force during the Gulf War to hit targets with pinpoint precision. The Navy uses this technology to fight fires on ships. With thermal technology, search and rescue time is reduced dramatically because the firefighter can maneuver with enhanced vision and handsfree operation.

The device helps firefighters see through smoke, to actually see the body heat from victims caught in a fire, and to see the heat rising through walls and floors. It enables a firefighter to move swiftly in unfamiliar surroundings, to size up the situation faster and more effectively. Signs of a potential flashover, once hidden by thick smoke, can now be visible. With Thermal Imaging, firefighters can avoid floors that have been dangerously weakened from a fire below.

In terms of saving lives, Thermal Imaging is the most significant advancement in firefighting technology in this century. Above all, Thermal Imaging reduces the firefighter's stress and anxiety by giving back the one thing fire takes away -- his sight.

The Duxbury Fire Department supports the need for Thermal Imaging. Several Massachusetts communities, including Bridgewater, have purchased the \$25,000 helmet. If you are interested in learning more about how we can bring this device to our firefighters in Duxbury, please contact Lt. John Bowser at the Duxbury Fire Department at 934-5693 or Louise Keogh at 585-9082.